

*The Negative Impacts of Written Responses in Standardized Testing on Students with Speech
Language Impairments*

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

This article examines the troubles that the written portions of two standardized tests, the ISTEP+ and the English 10 ECA, create for students with Speech-Language Impairments. It also summarizes what a diagnosis of SLI means for students and the potentially problematic academic areas involved. While there are many accommodations allowed and used in the classroom, they are not always allowed on standardized tests. This lack of accommodations along with a flawed system of holistic evaluation makes it more difficult for students with SLI to be successful than it is for their typically developing peers. Standardized test scores are used to determine a student's academic placement. To avoid misplacement, there needs to be adjustments made to support students with deficits.

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Process Analysis Statement

When you are looking for a thesis topic, everyone tells you to use a topic or idea that you are passionate about. My initial reaction was in that case it did not really matter what I wrote about because there is nothing that I liked enough to research and write about that much. My eventual career goal is to be a Speech-Language Pathologist so that I can be a clinician, preferably in a school. I am a huge advocate for hands on experience and used that as a crucial piece of criteria when choosing a graduate school program. Luckily, I did eventually find something to write about that I have a passion for. This project was inspired by a research article that I read for one of my speech-pathology classes. The article talked about many of the same issues expressed in this thesis and was the first time I was made aware that there was a problem. I had never thought about how difficult writing prompts in testing would be for students with SLI, and I was frustrated by how unfair the assignment and scoring methods were for this population of students. Upon receiving this information, I was fired up. I told everyone that would listen about the injustices that were impacting the same students that I was trying to learn how to help. Besides talking about this issue, I wanted to find a way to do something to make a change. I was frustrated that the situation exists but I was even more upset that nothing is being done to help solve it.

This thesis is the start of an action plan for myself. Before I can start pointing out problems to people, I need to make sure that I have my facts straight as well as have resources to direct others to. Originally, I was having a hard time nailing down exactly where to start and what my main points needed to be. I could talk about the issues and my thoughts on them for hours but putting it on paper was not quite as simple. I started out with an outline of topics that I wanted to make as well as what background information I would need to provide. For example,

while I know what specific language impairments are, not everyone does, which is one of many reasons that these injustices exist in the first place. However, once I had my general outline of topics, I spent some quality time on databases searching for scholarly articles that applied but at first I was not very successful.

There was awhile that I thought I was going to have to completely change the topic and plan because I was not finding the information I thought I needed. Thankfully, after some panicking and a couple of productive conversations with my advisor, we made a new and improved outline that gave me some more options of areas to look into. After that, I started finding more articles that would be useful as well as really diving into the Indiana Department of Education's website to choose and find out more about the specific tests I wanted to address. I settled on the ISTEP+ and English 10 ECA because they have written response portions to them and are taken by almost all students in Indiana. Both of these tests also are directed at age groups that speech language impairments impact the most, as opposed to tests like the SAT, which tests an age group less impacted by developmental issues.

I figured that the most time consuming portion of this project would be the research, so I decided that I wanted to get almost all that done first, before I started writing. I worked through each article, pen and highlighter at the ready, and started grouping my articles by topic. Some of these topics included: ISTEP+, English 10 ECA, SLI, and scoring methods. After I knew what information I had, I put it into a basic outline where I highlighted the main points that I wanted to make under each category. While this part of the process did get to be a bit tedious and boring, it definitely helped make writing go smoother than it would have otherwise.

Since I had most of my research done and an outline made, the writing part was not terrible. I basically just had to take my outline and expand upon the points that I needed to make.

I also had all my articles ready to go with the important parts marked so it was easier to refer back to them if needed. I used a little bit of a different style of writing process than I am used to. Usually, I sit down and start at the beginning and work on a paper straight through until I run out of things to say, proofread, and turn it in. This time, I basically started with fleshing out each independent idea. I gave them each a heading and then after that adjusted the order. The weirdest part for me was writing the initial scenario as one of the very last parts. After I wrote the scenario, I went back through and peppered in references to it in the relevant sections.

Working with an advisor also changed how I went about proofreading and editing my paper. I would send my thesis draft to my advisor every so often, when I had added a reasonable amount of content. She would read through and make suggestions and comments in the margins and send it back to me. This method was basically done so that my advisor wasn't handed a huge paper at the very end to sift through, and this way it would be broken up into digestible sections for her. As a result, I was making edits and corrections along the way throughout the whole writing process. While different from my usual, this method worked well and I might try using it more in the future. If not for the inevitable deadline that approached very rapidly, the writing portion of this was not very stressful.

With the writing and editing done, I created a document that I can use to keep my thoughts organized when I want to put together a well-spoken argument about this. Also, this document can be given to people who may not fully understand what speech-language impairments are and the impacts that they have on students. This is very valuable because I still want to use what I know to try to make improvements in the testing and scoring systems to make them better serve these students. I would love for this project to continue to develop into a proposal or document of some kind that I could present to lawmakers and test developers. I think

that this thesis has the potential to be a starting point for a bigger project of taking action to advocate for students with speech-language impairments. Someone needs to speak up to make a change to support the students, and I think that through writing this thesis I am closer to being able to be that person. I finally found a topic that I am the most passionate about, supporting my future students.

Scenario of a School Setting Trevor, an eight-year-old boy, sits in a classroom learning about the story of Lewis and Clark exploring the West. The teacher showed the class a map of the route that the explorers took as Trevor listened intently and traced the route with his finger on his handout. The teacher then asked the students to write a short story about a time that they went on an adventure like Lewis and Clark did. Trevor wants to write about a time that he went hiking with his grandpa but he keeps forgetting what he wants to say next and the sentences he wrote do not sound like the ones he hears his teacher use. Trevor pulls out his writing checklist that he was given when he was working with the school speech-language pathologist. The list gives him a reminder of what questions he needs to answer to make a good story such as, "Who is there? Where are they? and What did they do first? Second? Etc." The list helps Trevor put his ideas on paper so that other people can understand them. The teacher also worked with the speech-language pathologist to make a checklist for sentences to make sure Trevor capitalizes words, uses punctuation, and double checks his spelling. The checklists help Trevor be successful in class and he is working on starting to only using them to double check his work before turning it in as his writing is getting better and better. Trevor is very proud of his progress and often tells his parents when showing them his improving grades that he feels like he can write what he is thinking.

Unfortunately, his confidence fades when it is time to take standardized tests. Trevor is not allowed to use his lists during the required standardized tests. Even though Trevor is working on not needing his checklists all the time, he still keeps them with him and is used to referring to them. Trevor emerged from the testing room very upset and frustrated. He tells his teacher that he got nervous because he knew the test was important and that he needed to do well on it. Since he was nervous, "all the thoughts flew out of his head" and he reached in his pockets for his

checklists to remember that they were not there. Trevor remarked, "I didn't know how to put my ideas into words and I tried my best but my sentences didn't look as good as they do for class."

Trevor's test scores for the written responses were much lower than what would have been expected based on his grades in class. According to the test scores, Trevor was a candidate for special education and his teacher, speech-language pathologist, and parents talked to each other and argued that the administrators to keep him in a general education classroom since, with appropriate accommodations, he can understand the content being taught and be successful.

What is SLI? Our education system is faced with the dilemma of finding a way to accommodate all students and their individual needs. Schools have all types of students who walk through the doors in need of an education and it is a school's responsibility to do just that. In the above scenario, we recognize a child with a speech language impairment who successfully completes his in-class assignments when he uses the accommodations that were created for him by the speech-language pathologist and classroom teacher. However, when taking the high stakes standardized test, without appropriate accommodations, he struggled and was almost incorrectly placed in special education as a result. In today's schools, students like Trevor with language disorders are supported in the classroom but may be faced with extra obstacles when testing starts. Language disorders can have a critical impact on the academic performance of students but with the appropriate accommodations and fair grading systems can still be successful (Dockrell, Lindsay, Connelly, & Mackie, 2007).

Specific Language Impairment (SLI) is the most common disorder or impairment in school-aged children, affecting approximately 7.8% of children (Ervin, 2001). SLI is a general term used to describe a language impairment of any kind that occurs in a child, usually around elementary school age. Students with SLI can have expressive and receptive language difficulties

but have normal IQs, and no other neurological, sensory, or emotional deficits. While the cause of SLI is not clear, the impacts of it are long lasting and potentially detrimental to the student's ability to learn as well as communicate.

Children with SLI often start speaking later than their normally developing peers (Ervin 2001). As they grow older, they continue to struggle with different aspects of spoken language because not every student with SLI will present the same symptoms. Some potential areas of deficits include having a small vocabulary, accompanied by a tendency to be slower to acquire new words. Also, students with SLI can have symptoms such as trouble with tense markers, phonological skills, spelling, decoding, or semantic content, along with reading and reading comprehension difficulties. A disconnect with morphemes and the proper use of oral language makes it difficult for these patterns to be learned and generalized to written language (Werfel & Krimm, 2017). While every individual will present SLI differently, all of these symptoms are common impairments

Specific Language Impairment often also presents itself through a reduced working memory. This often means students have a smaller working memory capacity, making it difficult for them to remember things stored in short term memory or plan their speech or writing out ahead of time. Sometimes, this can have a grammatical impact, causing difficulties in the areas listed above (Dockrell et al., 2007).

SLI impacts students' writing as well. In combination with the lowered working memory capacity, students often have trouble with unity, coherence, and overall organization in written language. The reduced working memory in this situation would make it difficult for students to be able to hold, shape, and plan ideas in their heads. In writing, students with SLI may tend to leave out some words such as prepositions and articles as well as inflectional morphemes. Not

surprisingly, there is a lack of variety in sentence structure commonly found in SLI students' writing, with a tendency to produce mainly simple sentences. On top of the shorter sentences, the overall length of writings that students with SLI produce are typically shorter than ones produced by typically developing peers (Williams, Larkin, & Blaggan, 2012). In writing, students with SLI may tend to leave out some words such as prepositions and articles as well as inflectional morphemes. The omissions and simple sentence structures give their written works a choppy and disconnected feel, much like telegraphic speech. This type of speech is often characterized by a lack of prepositions as well as articles. Generally, the only words included are the ones that are absolutely critical for the point to still get across. For example, a student with typical language development may write, "Can Teddy go to the bathroom?" On the other hand, a student with SLI may write "Teddy go bathroom?" Both students are asking the same question, however, one clearly has more developed language skills.

SLI has both academic and social implications based on the language deficits that are presented. For example, a student with SLI has to find a way to compensate for the various potential language components such as a small vocabulary or trouble with morphemes in their schoolwork but also navigate through the social implications of such problems. These language deficits may be misinterpreted by the general public as being due to a lack of intelligence. False judgments like this can quickly snowball into students having lower self-esteem, speaking out less, being taken less seriously and being incorrectly labeled (Ervin 2001).

Aspects of language are interrelated Skill levels in reading, writing, and speaking depend on one other in social and academic settings. When one area is directly impacted, the others can suffer as well. To be proficient in one area of language, the others all need to be strong as well. For example, there is a strong tie between students with SLI and reading ability.

Many times, reading disorders such as dyslexia and lower reading comprehension abilities exist alongside SLI. At least half of children who present symptoms of SLI also show some type of reading impairment (Werfel & Krimm, 2017). In addition, student-writing skills stem from modeling the written language that they read. However, if students have trouble reading and understanding written text, they are less likely to pick up on patterns and structures that are characteristic of good writing. Deficits in reading also lead to less exposure to vocabulary, making it harder for students to learn new words to incorporate into their own usage. The slow development and reduced production abilities of spoken language also make it hard for patterns and rules to be learned and then applied to writing (Werfel & Krimm, 2017).

Importance of intervention A notable point about specific language impairments is the importance of intervention. This disorder can have lasting impacts into adulthood in both expressive and receptive language. To officially classify as a student with SLI, the noticeable impairments a student presents do not naturally improve over time as they would over the course of otherwise typical growth and developments. Due to this, students need support and directed instruction from a specialist such as a Speech-Language Pathologist to teach the missing skills (Ervin 2001).

What accommodations are currently available? Some accommodations are available to help students with SLI have a fair chance of accessing the academic information they need to learn and understand course content accommodations are available. Throughout the school year, students with specific language impairments should receive support and additional instruction from a speech-language pathologist either at the school or at an independent clinic. With such support, specialists create carefully written goals that are based on best practices and the students' individual needs. In order to reach the prescribed goals and facilitate improvement,

specialists plan and complete exercises in sessions to scaffold and shape the students' skills (Ervin, 2001).

SLP and IEP team While a student receives this support from a speech pathologist, it can be limited. Sometimes, a student only sees the speech pathologist a few times a week for a very limited time. At other times, these meetings are in a group setting instead of one-on-one and can be cut even shorter due to other conflicts with school functions. Not surprisingly, time with the speech pathologist is often not enough for students to reach their full potential. SLI students require time and additional interventions to be carried on in the classroom as well as during speech sessions. To ensure that skills taught in speech sessions are generalized, family members as well as teachers need to be involved. All parties need to coordinate to make sure to be consistent in the behavior and techniques they are encouraging. Constant enforcement and accommodations help the student grow and reach the skill level of their typically developing peers. The student in the initial scenario had his checklists created through collaboration between the teacher and the speech-language pathologist. This method made sure that all parties knew how the accommodation was to be used and to ensure that it was addressing the deficits.

Students with SLI all have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) written specifically for students' skill levels with the input of several qualified professionals as well as the parents or guardians. Each party brings their own area of expertise to identify procedures that can address students' needs and promote growth. In the IEP, accommodations to be made in the classroom are outlined as well as any other services that may be needed such as, time with a psychologist and any goals that the speech-language pathologist will be working on (Effective Evaluation Resource Center & Indiana IEP Resource Center, 2015). Some examples of adjustments that educators can make are allowing extra time for responses, both verbal and written, making sure

that the student has a quiet space to work and focus, and structuring assignments and tests so that they play on the student's strengths. For example, a teacher could give a test orally instead of written or vice versa depending on the student's skill level.

As previously discussed, many students with SLI have other deficits that occur in addition to the language challenges such as in reading. It is important to make sure that the IEP team is addressing the whole child and making accommodations to fit all of the aspects of impairment to ensure the success of the child. Academically, this may include the addition of simplified texts, asking additional questions to ensure comprehension, and using extra cues and scaffolding to support language and vocabulary developments (Do2learn, 2017). It is our responsibility to help all of our students to the best of our abilities and when professionals work together, accommodations can be very successful. However, accommodations need to be made in multiple settings including the classroom and in formal assessments to help scaffold students' learning as they work to improve their skills.

Unfortunately, this is not always in the power of the teacher or other school professionals. Standardized tests have their own sets of rules and do not necessarily allow for the same accommodations that are practiced in the classroom. One of the standardized tests that most elementary and middle school students in Indiana have to take is the ISTEP+. The only way that students do not have to take the ISTEP+ is if they are a rare case labeled to have severe cognitive disabilities. This is done as a last resort because it makes the student unqualified to earn a high school diploma. Most students with disabilities, including students with SLI, take the ISTEP+. These students may or may not be able to receive special accommodations on the test to help make the questions and information more accessible to them like they would in a classroom. Instead, they are held to the same expectations as their typically

developing peers (Effective Evaluation Resource Center & Indiana IEP Resource Center, 2015).

Accommodations in tests/what's the problem? While school can be challenging for students with SLI, the accommodations agreed upon by a multi-disciplinary team when creating the students Individualized Education Plan (IEP) can help. For example, a student that has a low working memory capacity or small vocabulary can be supported by having a visible word bank of the new terms to refer to when writing. This small accommodation can help the student access the information taught without the added obstacle of their impairment. However, standardized tests have much stricter rules about what accommodations can be provided in comparison to what can be done in class. There is a list of acceptable accommodations that can be done for ISTEP+ and English 10 ECA. However, this list is not all-inclusive. There are options that may not be accepted for use during testing even though the student has been using them all year in class and is used to having them. Besides being on the acceptable list, accommodations have to have been included in the IEP before the testing window starts.

Not having access to the normal accommodations breaks the usual pattern even more than the testing does on its own and can make students feel uncomfortable or like they can't complete the tasks given to them. In the beginning scenario, Trevor was already nervous because of the high stakes nature of the test but the situation was made worse because he was not allowed to use his checklists. The lists were helpful to Trevor, but instead of being allowed to use tools to help him overcome his deficits, he was thrown into an already uncomfortable situation without any support. There are some hoops to jump through to get an accommodation in place on a standardized test such as the ISTEP+ and English 10 ECA. However, if not done, students could end up scoring more poorly than they

would have due to test bias or just feeling uncomfortable due to the shift in procedures and supports available.

How ISTEP+ works The ISTEP+ is administered annually to grades 3-8 and 10 to test students in the areas of English/Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies. Some of the content areas are mainly assessed through multiple-choice questions. However, the Reading Comprehension portion uses open-ended, written response questions to evaluate students in addition to multiple-choice. Students have to read a selection and then refer to the texts to respond to the questions that follow. The written response questions are evaluated on a 2-point holistic scale (Effective Evaluation Resource Center & Indiana IEP Resource Center, 2015). According to the rubric, scores are supposed to be assigned based on the level of understanding that the child expresses about the prompt, without consideration being given to grammatical errors. High scoring responses will include text support for statements being made.

The English/Language portion of the ISTEP+ test requires students to demonstrate their writing abilities by writing an essay response to a given prompt. The prompt is scored holistically on two separate rubrics. There is a 6-point rubric that is supposed to evaluate the students' ideas, content, organization, and style. Some sub topics evaluated on this rubric include: fluency, word choice, and sentence patterns. There is a separate 4-point rubric scale that graders use to evaluate the grammatical aspects of the student's writing. This includes consideration of proper use of capitalization, punctuation, verbs, spelling and the presence of sentence fragments or run-ons. These scores are then combined to create one overall score that is placed into scores that are officially submitted and released (Indiana Department of Education, 2015; Indiana Department of Education, 2016b).

What's English 10 ECA? In addition to the ISTEP+, students in grade 10, in Indiana are required to complete an end of course assessment (ECA) to further test skill levels in English/Language Arts. This test is composed of a written essay, short answer constructed responses, and multiple-choice questions. The scoring system is the same for the English 10 ECA as it is for the ISTEP+ (Indiana Department of Education, 2016a). However, there is one difference in the instructions for the writing prompt between the two tests. On the English 10 ECA, there is an added section of text, under the writing prompt, that outlines what parts of the writing will be evaluated. As a result, students know what graders are looking for in their papers. This scoring breakdown is not present on the general ISTEP+.

Test bias While potentially helpful to some students, this breakdown of what is being assessed can cause further problems for students with SLI. Typically developing students may be able to use this information to make sure they include everything that they are supposed to in their response. However, focusing on the assessment of the assignment can cause further problems for students with SLI, as students who have deficits in these areas may fall victim to test bias. Test bias, also known as stereotype consciousness or stereotype threat is a phenomenon that is a testament to the power of the human brain and the impacts of the words and beliefs of others on ourselves (McKown & Strambler, 2009). One of the side effects of SLI, as well as language difficulties in general, is that people tend to assume that a person with SLI has a lower IQ than average. Speech deficits make it difficult to express thoughts and opinions so it is common for people with SLI to have trouble with others not taking them seriously. As a result, people with SLI may retreat in social situations and not talk much in public, which in turn can lead to behavior that is interpreted as unfriendly, unmotivated, and uninterested (Ervin 2001).

These false assumptions that are made can have an academic impact on students with SLI. If students are aware of the stereotypes surrounding them, then testing bias can come into play. Testing bias is when the negative academic stereotypes about an individual have an impact on the performance causing them to fulfill the expectations laid out. For example, students who have SLI and know that many people believe that they have a lower IQ than their peers, could be overly concerned with living up to the expectations set out for them. However, when this causes enough distress and distraction, they usually do end up performing worse than their peers do on tests. This unfortunate phenomenon can impact students as young as 5-11 years (Mckown & Strambler, 2009). At this age, they are socially aware enough to understand the assumptions that the general population is holding about them and differentiate between the positive and negative opinions surrounding them.

Testing bias can be triggered by explicit or implicit reminders (McKown & Strambler, 2009). For example, a teacher, who announces prior to a test saying, "I know not all of you are good at reading but this reading test is very important to your future" can create test bias in students who know that people think they are not good at writing and do not expect them to be successful and then perform accordingly. However, a comment a few days ago to an SLI student announcing that their barely passing grade was good for them still implies low expectations for success and can be carried into the test setting. The English 10 ECA provides some information about how the essay will be graded on the same page as the prompt. SLI students are likely aware of their deficits and when they see a list of grading criteria including, "language conventions, sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, and organization" testing bias is likely to set in and impact performance (Indiana Department of Education, 2016a). The situation is exaggerated when

teachers announce to classes the importance of doing well on tests. Even by giving helpful testing tips such as eating breakfast and getting a good night's sleep, they are drawing attention to the importance of the test. All of these comments raise the stakes for students with SLI and as they desperately try to avoid living up to negative expectations, they drive themselves directly to meet them.

What's it like for students with SLI? Students who have SLI may find that they have trouble with completing their schoolwork as well as meeting the demands of the standardized tests. While the accommodation procedures mentioned above can help, they still do not erase all of the potential for unfair assessment. For example, tests look for details and specific references to the text in written responses but the student may not have been able to understand the story in the first place. These tests are full of advanced vocabulary that the student may not be able to understand or have the reading and processing abilities to comprehend. In the writing portions of these tests, they may not be able to plan out an extended essay response that would be required for full credit. Unfortunately, accommodations that help students with SLI be successful in that classroom such as writing checklists as well as specialized vocabulary lists are not allowed on standardized assessment. Their limited working memories can impair their ability to plan ahead to ensure that their writing flows well. They also are likely to have many grammatical errors as a result of the SLI, which would lead to them getting lower scores (Williams et al., 2012). Students with SLI also tend to produce shorter responses than their peers, which puts them at a disadvantage.

What is holistic scoring and what's wrong with it? Reliability? The ISTEP+ and English 10 ECA both use rubrics in the scoring of the essay and constructed response portions. This method of applying one overall score to measure all the aspects of the response is referred to a

holistic scoring. This method can lead to one weak point overshadowing the strengths and leaves lots of room for the grader to present personal biases and opinions about what they feel like are the most important aspects of writing instead of following the rubric. One of the first areas for potential problems is grader reliability. These systems use multiple scorers to help create some consistency however; the graders all still need to be on the same page with what to focus on while evaluating. This is achieved through extensive amounts of training and practice grading attempts followed by comparisons and discussion. This requires a large amount of time and in turn cost. ISTEP+ does state that the evaluators receive extensive training but does not define “extensive” such as to how much time is involved or what aspects are being covered. To achieve a proper level of reliability of .90, there needs to be at least two evaluators and multiple tasks considered when grading with a holistic scale to get a full understanding of a student’s written abilities (Kim, Schatschneider, Wanzek, Gatlin, & Otaiba, 2017). Neither guidelines for the ISTEP+ or the English 10 ECA say how many evaluators are used in grading. The only mention of an additional rater is in the circumstance of illegible handwriting (Effective Evaluation Resource Center & Indiana IEP Resource Center, 2015; Indiana Department of Education, 2016a). It is possible that the essays are at the mercy of the opinions and personal biases of one scorer.

The six-point scale In addition to poor reliability due to a minimal amount of raters, holistic scoring is often based on a six-point scale, which does not provide enough levels to properly distinguish and score abilities. Instead, a scale with more potential scores such as adding a plus and minus to each of the six options has shown to lead to more consistent scores and higher reliability. This type of rubric is called multi-trait or higher order rubric, and research is showing that this method can be a large improvement upon the holistic scoring system (Lee,

Gentile, & Kantor, 2009). In addition to increasing reliability, higher order rubrics give more opportunities to accurately represent the strengths and weaknesses of the students.

Scoring content vs. grammar Students with language learning disabilities, including SLI, tend to have lower holistic scores on written exams than their typically developing peers. It is expected that students with SLI would have more grammatical errors due to the nature of their disorder. However, these students can have just as well developed ideas as their typically developing peers, yet are still scoring lower in all aspects addressed on the rubrics, including content (Koutsoftas & Gray, 2012). Raters admit to not being able to grade the content and grammar completely separately, although they are expected to do this well. However, they also feel that having a more refined scale such as a higher order rubric, allows for them to make more distinctions between the strengths and weaknesses. It has been shown that using methods other than traditional holistic scoring has led to higher content scores for students with language learning disabilities. This alternative rubric allows for the students to be recognized for their understanding of concepts in these methods instead of having what they can do overshadowed by the symptoms of their language impairments (Attali, Lewis, & Steier, 2012). Higher order rubrics have been shown to help solve another previously discussed problem with holistic scoring.

Length and score correlation According to Attali, Lewis, and Steier in *Scoring with the computer: Alternative procedures for improving the reliability of holistic essay scoring*, written responses that are longer tend to get higher scores from human graders. Naturally, an essay with more examples will be longer than one without however, if there are multiple essays of varying length mixed together, graders start to assume that the longer texts are more supported. One interviewed rater stated, 'It's almost as if you can become conditioned to expect a certain score

after looking at the ones of similar size over time' and 'might unduly influence a rater's thinking to even subconsciously tend towards "longer must be better".' The content may not always be thoroughly evaluated for quality and instead the quantity leads to assumptions by the grader. However, students with SLI cannot easily produce long narratives and instead may provide succinct answers. Their essays can still answer all that is required, however, they may be scored lower solely due to how many pages were taken to make the intended point. (2012). The ISTEP+ and English 10 ECA are both scored by humans. While length is not supposed to be a contributing factor to the overall score assigned to the essays in the assessment of these tests, they open themselves up to these kinds of human errors and assumptions with their current grading techniques. (Effective Evaluation Resource Center & Indiana IEP Resource Center, 2015). This is just one of many potential problems that comes with using human scoring and holistic rubrics to score standardized tests. Instead, Higher order rubrics allow for more distinction in the scoring and therefore make it harder to rate based on assumptions such as long essays providing more text support than shorter ones (Lee et al., 2009).

Specific problems with the rubrics The ISTEP+ and English 10 ECA both use two separate rubrics when grading essays, in theory, one for content and one for grammar. However, raters have admitted to having trouble separating these two aspects. It does not help that there are some points being evaluated on the six-point content rubric that also appear on the grammatical scale despite the guidelines stating that for the writing rubric, "it is read as if it contains no spelling, grammatical, punctuation, or other mechanical errors." These same rules are given for the two-point constructed response questions as well (Indiana Department of Education, 2015). On the ISTEP+, the six-point writing rubric, the size of the vocabulary used and sentence patterns are both evaluated. However, these are both aspects that are also addressed or related to

aspects on the grammar and usage rubric as well (Indiana Department of Education, 2016b). Vocabulary as well as sentence fluency and structure also fall on both rubrics for the English 10 ECA test (Indiana Department of Education, 2016a). Students are being scored multiple times on the same content. This means that students can be missing points in multiple areas due to the same mistake. Unfortunately, these areas that are being double assessed are troublesome skills for students with SLI to master. It is likely that students with SLI are losing points off of the writing rubric for deficits in language that are supposed to only be evaluated with the other rubric. This misplacement of grading criteria is creating more ways that students' strengths can be overshadowed.

What do we use the scores for? Despite all of the problematic aspects of holistic scoring for students with SLI and other disorders in general, school systems continue to use this method. Additionally, schools as well as the state use these standardized student scores as a complete picture of student ability and a basis for judgment. These scores are often determining factors in deciding if a student needs to go into a special education program or if they are capable of handling the extra challenge of a gifted program. Labeling a student as special needs or gifted comes with a lot of social and psychological implications as well as impacting the type of instruction that the student receives. Trevor in the beginning scenario is just one example of a student that almost was incorrectly placed into an academic program due to his test scores. Trevor was one of the more lucky students who had professionals who were willing to speak up on his behalf, and were willing to look at the results of more informal assessments in order to get a complete understanding of his abilities. Standardized test scores are also often used to measure a school's effectiveness and they can play a role in the amount of funding that a school receives (Kim et al., 2017). The amount of state funding that a school gets is crucial to the operation of

the school and an adjustment of that total creates a shift in the whole budget. Depending on the direction of the shift, this can lead to having to cut programs and staff, leaving less support for the students who need it.

Overall, high-stakes standardized tests, especially written responses, are not designed in a way that empowers or gives students with SLI or other disabilities and impairments a fair chance to be successful. There are some ways that this can be fixed or at least improve the situation.

While there may not be one single answer that will fix everything, there needs to be an effort to make improvements for the sake of the students. A few suggestions include expanding the list of acceptable accommodations to be used on the test. If an accommodation is acceptable in the classroom, why isn't it on standardized tests? Also, adjustments should be made to the grading methods. First of all, essays should be read and scored by at least two well-trained people to help erase some of the risk of bias. An alteration to the rubric would also be beneficial. Switching from a holistic scoring method to using a multi trait rubric would allow for students with a large distinction between their strengths and weaknesses to get proper credit for what they can do.

While no single one of these options may be the perfect choice, a combination of adjustments can support students with SLI and other special needs, and allow them a fair chance to have their skills accurately assessed.

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